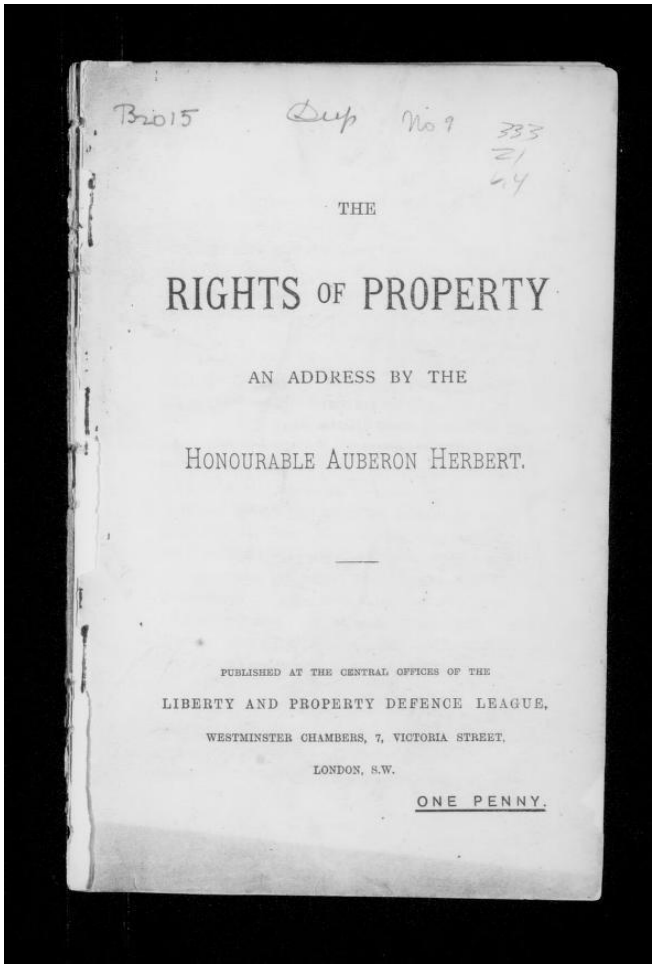
The Rights of Property, by Auberon Herbert



My lords, ladies and gentlemen, I have to thank you for the kind compliment you have paid me in asking me to take the chair today. As you, [Lord Wemyss] said, there are certain differences of opinion between those who act with your League and those with whom I generally act, but I conceive that every party must have its different sections. In almost every party there is a right wing and a left wing; a certain number of persons who, perhaps, are influenced and actuated rather by what I may call the conservative and the practical considerations; and there is another section who are generally actuated and influenced by what I may call, the more radical and — at all events in their own opinion — the more philosophical considerations. But, whilst I think that it is wise for every section to maintain its

own distinctive position so long as it firmly believes in the opinions which it professes, whilst I do not think we ought either of us to merge our own individuality, yet I think we ought always to be ready to act together. I would ask whether it would not be altogether a small, a petty, and a mistaken view of our position, if our differences were to count for everything and our points of agreement to count for nothing.

It is true that I have heard it whispered by our friend, the man in the street, who knows so much always about our affairs — I have heard it sometimes whispered that my friend, Mr. Crofts, the able secretary of this League, occasionally devotes a little more of his attention to one of those two sisters — Liberty and Property — who stand at the head of your programme, than he does to the other. I have heard it hinted that he is sometimes a little more warmly attached to the fair sister Property than he is to the fair sister Liberty. I shall not presume to offer any judgment upon that point. I shall leave that entirely as a matter for his own conscience, but I should like to say this: If this League, which has met here to day, is taking its stand upon this particular point that, it seeks to maintain every kind of property — be it land or any other form of property — perfect with all its individual rights, that it intends not to hand down this great possession of property clipped and mutilated as regards those rights to another generation — then, I say, of you or any other body having this end in view, that you are undertaking the most important work which any body of men can undertake as regards the future.

It is perfectly true that today property seems rather a question of the rich than of the poor, but it will not be so tomorrow or the day after. The whole tendency of a free, progressive society is by natural and peaceful means to distribute property amongst an ever increasing number of the community; only if you wish that to be the case, there is one condition which must be absolutely maintained, and that is that the great prize should lose nothing of its attractiveness. If this prize is to act upon the mass of your people, if it is to lead them to bear sacrifices on its behalf, if it is to make your people frugal, prudent, and self-denying, if it is to make them indifferent to the offers which demagogues place before them, you must absolutely take your stand upon this condition; that property is to remain as it is with all its inherent advantages, with all its full individual rights — stripped of none of them.

Well, now, if you will allow me, I will glance at the two great divisions of wealth. I will glance, first of all, at the question of land. Well, we know that the ideals with respect to land change and must change in these days. A few years ago it was the ideal of landowners to have a large unbroken estate stretching far round their hall doors; and it was their ideal — and a very right and good ideal — that this great estate should be farmed by men, possessed of skill and capital, following the best agricultural methods; whilst everywhere upon the estate should be found good and comfortable cottages for the labourers.

But, I hope you will allow me to say that I think this is an ideal which, in presence of the great forces that are pressing upon us today, must give way to another ideal. I may be wrong in my view, but I am quite sure you will let me, for what it is worth, lay it before you. I would venture to say to all landowners, if they would listen to words from my lips, that the great point to which they should direct their attention at the present moment in order that we may preserve the rights of property in land uninjured and unlessened in any manner, in order that we may check the growing movement towards the municipalisation or communalisation of land — the great step to take is to try to bring the small owners into line with the large owners. I do not myself wish to see that done by any state machinery. What I should like today strongly to urge upon all friends, is that those who have large properties should deliberately break off a piece of that property, and divide it into small portions — small holdings —and offer them as freeholds to the most vigorous and the most capable of the small men on systems of deferred payment.

I would venture to go even further. I think some of us who are not owners, might still contrive to take a part in this useful work. I think we might join ourselves together and say that we will — each of us according to our opportunities we will, whether in one, two, or three years, be responsible for creating one such small property, or more, as I have described. For the sake of the future (and it is for the sake of the future that I want to do this thing, as well as for the sake of justice to the present large owners, whom I would seek to shelter from acts of sweeping injustice), it is for the sake of the future, that I want to preserve land not with obligations, and limitations and state servitudes placed upon it, but as

perfect and complete freeholds of which a man, when he had once gained possession might enjoy the full fruition.

Well now, I will briefly pass to the other great division of wealth, the division which is not land but capital. Strongly as I am opposed to all socialistic methods, I wish to make this confession to the socialists — that at least in one sense they are the only people who have suggested the true solution of the labour problem. That is to say, amongst all the solutions of the labour question which are offered us, I see none which are thoroughly satisfactory, efficient, and final except that the worker everywhere should become capitalist, not by socialistic means, not by methods of expropriation and appropriation; but in that good, wholesome, way of devoting their savings to special ends, which the working classes already have shown us- they understand so well.

We have only to glance at what has already been done to see what is possible in the future. We have only to glance at the great co-operative successes, the co-operative factories — still few — that are now beginning to come into existence, the large sums contributed to the trades unions, and invested by them, the large sums in the Savings Banks, the large sums contributed to the sick benefit societies, and I might even take other things, such as that most excellent new movement which, I believe, is spreading in different parts of the country where workmen are undertaking a system of their own medical relief. All these things are evidence to us of what this class can do when once it enters that good road of individual frugality, self-denial, and determination by self-help to conquer the future.

It is worthy of remark that it generally happens that, we begin to do a thing unconsciously before we do it consciously; and my belief is that the time has now come when our working people will realise to what much larger ends this power of saving capital may be directed. I do not believe it would be an impracticable or even very difficult thing for our working people (if they once placed the idea steadfastly before them of getting hold of the capital of the country, and thus of sharing in the direction of its great industrial concerns) to go on saving and saving, although the amounts saved might be only twopence or threepence per week, until capital and labour become merged together. They could do this great thing I believe; and they would be stimulated to do it by having this distinct aim in view.

It is that distinct aim, I say, let us from this day henceforth, put before the work people of this country. Let us say to them, "Combine in saving and investing unions, and put your pennies together until you have gradually acquired a solid part interest in the great industrial concerns of the country. Then you will arrive at that blessed condition when a worker will be at the same time that he is a worker also a capitalist. And his income in the future, to which I am looking forward, will no longer depend solely, as it does to-day, upon his weekly earnings, but part of it will come from his invested capital, and, at the same time that he receives from this double source, he will necessarily have a powerful ruling voice as regards the conditions under which his own labour is given." I will not trouble you with figures, how pennies saved grow to pounds and how pounds grow to millions of pounds, but of this I am quite certain, that a very small contribution indeed — a contribution so small as a weekly twopence — laid aside with this distinct intention of becoming part owner of the industrial capital of the country, would altogether in a few years change the present condition of the mass of our workmen.

If I am not unduly occupying your time, I should like to touch upon one other point and that is the very important point of taxation. Now, I am known by my friends to have extreme views upon that subject, and I shall not inflict them upon you here. But I expect you will not quarrel greatly with me when I say that we are all of us of one mind in this matter so far at least that we are determined that that vast and complex thing which we call society shall not in this contry become merely the happy hunting ground of the politician. We are determined, as far as lies upon us and as far as we can influence the minds and consciences of our countrymen, that the wealth of this country — whatever form it may be in — shall not be used as the great bribery fund of both political parties. And, if we are determined upon that, then, I ask, has not the time come when, at all events, your local taxation which has, in some parts of the country, been brought to such an excessive height and has been so mismanaged and wasted — has not the time come when, at any rate, if you are not prepared to go any further in my direction you should reach this point: that you should propose that there should be a distinct, definite limit to that local taxation, beyond which, apart from the consent of the individual taxpayer, your local body could not pass.

It seems to me — I will not lay before you my own special view — it seems to me a monstrous thing that an elected body should consider that the holy rite of election gives them a right to dip their hand, as deeply as they choose, in the pockets of any persons who live within their jurisdiction. That appears to me to be a perfectly monstrous claim which never can be morally justified and has simply grown up by accident. It has grown up — as these things do grow up — by a sort of negligence and inattention on our part. Has not the time come when you should say to your Local authority, "Gentlemen, we are prepared" — for example — "to give you 20 per cent, of our income, 20 per cent of our rateable value you may have to amuse yourselves with, but that shall be your legal estate, beyond that you shall not pass."

My noble friend (Lord Wemyss) laughs, and I gather he is shocked at the amount I propose. I agree, and think it is shocking thus to hand over a fifth of one's income, principally to be wasted, but, I believe — although I do not know so much as I should of London local affairs — that in certain parts of the metropolis the suggested limit has aleady been exceeded. I think in South Kensington it has passed beyond that — I think it is nearly 25 per cent. Does any one know precisely? (A voice after a pause, "A gentleman says in some part it is nearly 40 per cent.") I confess that our ignorance upon this subject deserves some blame on our part; but it also arises from our helplessness — which is caused by many things of which I cannot speak now — in presence of the great institutions that rob us at their pleasure.

Well, just in the same way as I would treat your local authority, so I would deal with such institutions as the London School Board. As one who is not a warm admirer of the proceedings of that Board, I venture to say that they (the Board) have shown that they do not understand their own finances, that they do not understand how to look after their own buildings, whilst at the same time they are manifesting an increased greediness for power. I would deal with them exactly in the same way; I would give them so much and I would draw the line at that so much, and not a penny beyond that should they ever get, except as a voluntary contribution. If they wished to have more, if they wished to pass beyond that limit, then let them throw themselves upon the good feeling and business judgment of the citizens, and if they could make out a case — if they could show some good, real

purpose to be answered by this extra outlay — I suspect that English citizens, acting freely and not under compulsion, would be ready to meet such a demand.

And now I have only to say, in conclusion, that I think we had better make up our minds to face one great fact — we can hope for very little from either of the two great political parties in the State. I do not know whether any of you are more hopeful than I am on this subject, but I must say I think we are only deceiving ourselves, if those of us who care for liberty and for free action, and who wish to restrict state restrictions, look to either political party to help us. I quite admit that there is a sort of difference in the manner in which they treat us. The Conservative Government, when it takes something from us, is rather like the old-fashioned highwaymen. They act in a pleasant, polite manner, they lift their hat and wish you "good morning" and make you a graceful bow, but all this ceremonial ends very much in the same result — your purse is taken from you. I am sorry to have to say it of my Radical friends, but truth constrains me to say that they make the same process as unpleasant as they can. They are more like the modern garroter, who nearly strangles you, knocks you down, curses you while you are on the ground, and then departs with your property. But, so far as the final outcome or result is concerned, I see very little difference in either case. At the same time I do not wonder that the wealthier people prefer to have their purses lightened by those who do it with sympathizing expressions and eloquent horror at the violent methods of their rivals.

Of this, looking at the field of politics, I feel assured; if we really intend to pursue this path of personal rights, if we intend to pursue this path of Individualism, we must do it as a separate and distinct party. We have to learn in this matter from those others who have been successful in their own way. The Irish party are one example amongst others. They have refused to ally themselves, except on their own terms, with any party. The teetotallers have done the same, the supporters of woman suffrage have done the same, and the socialists have done the same; and, in each case, a large measure of their success has been, I believe, owing to the fact that they have distinctly stood aloof from both parties. They have simply said "We will help that party who accept our views." And that must be our position. Don't go to them; and in time one or other will come to you.

Every young party has, we know, an uphill fight before it. The thing we want to do is not to influence this election or that election, or to help to return this or that man to parliament — what we have got to do is to set ourselves steadily to familiarise the country, especially the workman, with our own ideas; and if we only poll at each election one-tenth or one-twentieth part of the votes, at all events we shall impress the people of this country with the fact that we have a creed, and are ready to make sacrifices for it. If we are to do any good we must be a fighting party and an uncompromising party. I repeat that there is nothing to hope from the two political parties as they are. I am not going to waste your time or my time by blaming the leaders on either side. I doubt if they can help their own conduct. There is a pressure of forces behind both of them which makes them, as regards their own direction, the most helpless men in the world. I am not a sufficiently good arithmetician, to make so abstruse a calculation myself, but somebody, perhaps, maybe found competent to calculate what fraction of their own conscience and judgment each one of them is able to preserve.

I do not wish to speak too much in blame, because I recognize that great forces are pressing upon them and leave them no choice in the matter. When once you have entered upon a struggle for power, you must, in order to content and satisfy the great body of followers who look to you for victory, out-manœuvre, and out-march, oat-bid and out-trick your opponents. It is the necessity placed upon you by the very circumstances of the case. I will not waste your time or mine by apportioning the blame upon either the leaders of the Opposition or of the Government, but I will say this: if you and I wish to lessen this terrible evil, if we are sick from the bottom of our hearts of this great game of out-manœuvring and out- bidding, what we have got to do is to destroy the object of the struggle itself. We have got to limit and restrict power, to do away with the great prize which is for ever dangled before the eyes of our politicians ; and, when we have done that, we shall find that we have cut down to the very heart and root of the evil.